

Interpretatio graeca

Interpretatio graeca ([Latin](#) for 'Greek translation'), or "interpretation by means of Greek [models]", refers to the tendency of the ancient Greeks to identify foreign deities with their own gods.^{[1][2]} It is a [discourse](#)^[3] used to interpret or attempt to understand the mythology and religion of other cultures; a [comparative](#) methodology using [ancient Greek religious concepts and practices](#), [deities](#), and [myths, equivalencies, and shared characteristics](#).



A Roman wall painting showing the Egyptian goddess [Isis](#) (seated right) welcoming the Greek heroine [Io](#) to Egypt

The phrase may describe Greek efforts to explain others' beliefs and myths, as when [Herodotus](#) describes [Egyptian religion](#) in terms of perceived Greek analogues, or when [Dionysius of Halicarnassus](#) and [Plutarch](#) document [Roman cults](#), [temples](#), and practices under the names of equivalent Greek deities. *Interpretatio graeca* may also describe non-Greeks' interpretation of their own belief systems by comparison or assimilation with Greek models, as when [Romans](#) adapt Greek myths and iconography under the names of their own gods.

Interpretatio romana is comparative discourse in reference to [ancient Roman religion](#) and [myth](#), as in the formation of a distinctive [Gallo-Roman religion](#). Both the Romans and the Gauls reinterpreted Gallic religious traditions in relation to Roman models, particularly [Imperial cult](#).

[Jan Assmann](#) considers the [polytheistic](#) approach to internationalizing gods as a form of "intercultural translation":

The great achievement of polytheism is the articulation of a common semantic universe. ... The meaning of a deity is his or her specific character as it unfolded in myths, hymns, rites, and so on. This character makes a deity comparable to other deities with similar traits. The similarity of gods makes their names mutually translatable. ... The practice of translating the names of

the gods created a concept of similarity and produced the idea or conviction that the gods are international.^[4]

[Pliny the Elder](#) expressed the "translatability" of deities as "different names to different peoples" (*nomina alia aliis gentibus*).^[5] This capacity made possible the [religious syncretism](#) of the [Hellenistic era](#) and the pre-Christian [Roman Empire](#).

Examples



A Roman fresco from [Herculaneum](#) depicting [Hercules](#) (from Etruscan [Hercle](#) and ultimately Greek [Heracles](#)) and [Achelous](#) (patron deity of the [Achelous River](#) in Greece) from [Greco-Roman mythology](#), 1st century AD

[Herodotus](#) was one of the earliest authors to engage in this form of interpretation. In his observations regarding the Egyptians, he establishes Greco-Egyptian equivalents that endured into the [Hellenistic era](#), including [Amon/Zeus](#), [Osiris/Dionysus](#), and [Ptah/Hephaestus](#). In his observations regarding the [Scythians](#), he equates their queen of the gods, [Tabiti](#), to [Hestia](#), [Papaïos](#) and [Api](#) to [Zeus](#) and [Gaia](#) respectively, and [Argimpasa](#) to [Aphrodite Urania](#), while also claiming that the Scythians worshipped equivalents to [Herakles](#) and [Ares](#), but which he does not name.

Some pairs of Greek and Roman gods, such as Zeus and [Jupiter](#), are thought to derive from a common [Indo-European](#) archetype ([Dyeus](#) as the supreme sky god), and thus exhibit shared functions by nature. Others required more expansive theological and poetic efforts: though both [Ares](#) and [Mars](#) are war gods, Ares was a relatively minor figure in Greek religious practice and deprecated by the poets, while Mars was a father of the Roman people and a central figure of archaic Roman religion.

Some deities dating to Rome's oldest religious stratum, such as [Janus](#) and [Terminus](#), had no Greek equivalent. Other Greek divine figures, most notably [Apollo](#), were adopted directly into Roman culture, but underwent a distinctly Roman development, as when [Augustus](#) made Apollo one of his [patron deities](#). In the early period, [Etruscan culture](#) played an intermediary role in transmitting Greek myth and religion to the Romans, as evidenced in the linguistic transformation of Greek [Heracles](#) to Etruscan [Her\[er\]cle](#) to Roman [Hercules](#).

Interpretatio romana

The phrase *interpretatio romana* was first used by the Imperial-era historian [Tacitus](#) in the [Germania](#).^[6] Tacitus reports that in a [sacred grove](#) of the [Nahanarvali](#), "a priest adorned as a woman presides, but they commemorate gods who in Roman terms (*interpretatione romana*) are [Castor and Pollux](#)."^[7] Elsewhere,^[8] he identifies the principal god of the Germans as [Mercury](#), perhaps referring to [Wotan](#).^[9]



Gilt bronze head from the cult statue of Sulis Minerva from the [Temple at Bath](#)

Some information about the deities of the ancient [Gauls](#) (the [continental Celts](#)), who left no written literature other than inscriptions, is preserved by Greco-Roman sources under the names of Greek and Latin equivalents. A large number of [Gaulish theonyms](#) or cult titles are preserved, for instance, [in association with Mars](#). As with some Greek and Roman divine counterparts, the perceived similarities between a Gallic and a Roman or Greek deity may reflect a common Indo-European origin.^[10] [Lugus](#) was identified with [Mercury](#), [Nodens](#) with Mars as healer and protector, and [Sulis](#) with [Minerva](#). In some cases, however, a Gallic deity is given an *interpretatio romana* by means of more than one god, varying among literary texts or inscriptions. Since the religions of the [Greco-Roman world](#) were not dogmatic, and [polytheism](#) lent itself to multiplicity, the concept of "deity" was often expansive, permitting multiple and even contradictory functions within a single divinity, and overlapping powers and functions among the diverse figures of each pantheon. These tendencies extended to cross-cultural identifications.^[11]

In the Eastern empire, the [Anatolian storm god](#) with his [double-headed axe](#) became [Jupiter Dolichenus](#), a favorite cult figure among soldiers.

Application to the Jewish religion

Roman scholars such as [Varro](#) interpreted the monotheistic god of the Jews into Roman terms as [Caelus](#) or [Jupiter Optimus Maximus](#). Some Greco-Roman authors seem to have understood the Jewish invocation of [Yahweh Sabaoth](#) as [Sabazius](#).^[12] In a similar vein, [Plutarch](#) gave an example of a symposium question "Who is the god of the Jews?", by which he meant: "What is his Greek name?" as we can deduce from the first speaker at the symposium, who maintained that the Jews worshiped [Dionysus](#), and that the day of [Sabbath](#) was a festival of Sabazius. [Lacunae](#) prevent modern scholars from knowing the other speakers' thoughts.^[13] [Tacitus](#), on the topic of the [Sabbath](#), claims that "others say that it is an observance in honour of [Saturn](#), either from the primitive elements of their faith having been transmitted from the [Idæi](#), who are said to have shared the flight of that God, and to have founded the race",^[14] implying Saturn was the god of the Jews.

From the Roman point of view, it was natural to apply the above principle to the [Jewish](#) God. However, the Jews, unlike other peoples living under Roman rule, rejected any such attempt out of hand, regarding such an identification as the worst of [sacrilege](#). This complete divergence of views was one of the factors contributing to the frequent friction between the Jews and the Roman Empire; for example, the Emperor [Hadrian](#)'s decision to rebuild [Jerusalem](#) under the name of [Aelia Capitolina](#), a city dedicated to Jupiter, precipitated the bloodbath of the [Bar Kokhba revolt](#).

Emperor [Julian](#), the 4th century pagan emperor, remarked that "these Jews are in part god-fearing, seeing that they revere a god who is truly most powerful and most good and governs this world of sense, and, as I well know, is worshipped by us also under other names".^[15] However, Julian specifies no "other names" under which the Jewish god was worshiped.

In late antiquity mysticism, the sun god [Helios](#) is sometimes equated to the Judeo-Christian God.^[16]

Cross-cultural equivalencies

The following table is a list of [Greek](#), [Roman](#), [Etruscan](#), [Egyptian](#), [Sumerian](#), [Phoenician](#), [Zoroastrian](#), and [Celtic](#) equivalencies via the *interpretationes*. These are not necessarily gods who share similar traits (as viewed by modern scholarship or readers, at least), and rarely do they share a common origin (for that, see [comparative Indo-European pantheons](#)); they are simply gods of various cultures whom the Greeks or Romans identified (either explicitly in surviving

works, or as supported by the analyses of modern scholars) with their own gods and heroes. This system is easily seen in the names of the days of the week, which were frequently translated according to the interpretatio.

Greek	Roman	Etruscan	Egyptian	Phoenician	Zororastrian	Celtic	Functions
Achilles		Achle					<i>hero</i>
Adonis		Atunis	Osiris	Tammuz (Adōn)			<i>agriculture; resurrection</i>
Amphitrite	Salacia		Hatmehit				<i>sea goddess</i>
Anemoi	Venti				Vayu-Vata		<i>winds</i>
Aphrodite	Venus	Turan (Apru)	Hathor / Isis ^[17]	Astarte	Anahita		<i>beauty; sex; love</i>
Apollo		Apulu	Horus	Resheph	Mithra	Belenus / Maponos / Borvo / Grannus	<i>light; prophecy; healing; plagues; archery; music; poets</i>
Ares	Mars	Laran	Anhur		Verethragna	Toutatis / Nodens / Neton	<i>war</i>
Artemis	Diana	Artume	Bastet ^[18]	Kotharat	Drvaspa		<i>hunting, the hunt; wilderness, wild animals; virginity, childbirth; Diana: lit. heavenly or divine</i>
Asclepius	Aesculapius / Vejove	Veiove	Imhotep	Eshmun			<i>healing</i>
Athena	Minerva ^[19]	Menrva	Neith ^[20] / Isis	Anat	Anahita	Sulis / Belisama / Senuna / Coventina / Icovellauna / Sequana	<i>wisdom; war strategy; the arts and crafts; weaving</i>
Atlas		Aril	Shu ^[21]				<i>holder of the celestial spheres</i>
Atropos	Morta	Leinth					<i>Atropos: lit. inflexible; death</i>
Boreas	Aquilo	Andas					<i>North Wind or Devouring One</i>
Castor and Polydeuces (Dioscuri)	Castor and Pollux (Gemini)	Castur and Pultuce (Tinas cliniar)					<i>twins</i>

Greek	Roman	Etruscan	Egyptian	Phoenician	Zororastrian	Celtic	Functions
Charites	Graces						<i>grace; splendor; festivity; charity</i>
Charon		Charun	Aqen				<i>fierce, flashing, feverish gaze (eyes)</i>
Chloris	Flora						<i>Chloris: lit. greenish-yellow, pale green, pale, pallid, fresh; Flora: lit. flower</i>
Clotho	Nona						<i>spinning; thread</i>
Cronus	Saturn	Satre	Khnum	El (Elus)			<i>Time, generation, dissolution, agriculture</i>
Cybele	Magna Mater						<i>Magna Mater: lit. Great Mother</i>
Demeter	Ceres	Zerene	Isis ^[22]		Ashi		<i>grains, agricultural fertility; Demeter: lit. Earth Mother</i>
Dionysus	Liber / Bacchus	Fufluns	Osiris ^[23]			Cernunnos	<i>wine and winemaking; revelry; ecstasy; Liber: lit. the free one</i>
Enyo	Bellona	Enie	Sekhmet				<i>war</i>
Eos	Aurora / Matuta	Thesan	Tefnut				<i>dawn</i>
Erinyes	Dirae						<i>Furies</i>
Eris	Discordia	Eris	Anat	Shahar			<i>strife</i>
Eros	Cupid (Amor)	Erus					<i>sexual love</i>
Euterpe		Euturpa / Euterpe					<i>"she who delights"; muse of music (especially flute music) and</i>

Greek	Roman	Etruscan	Egyptian	Phoenician	Zororastrian	Celtic	Functions
							<i>song; later, also of lyric poetry</i>
Eurus	Vulturnus						<i>East Wind</i>
Gaia	Terra / Tellus	Cel	Geb		Zam		<i>the earth</i>
Hades	Dis Pater / Pluto / Orcus	Aita	Anubis / Osiris	Mot	Angra Mainyu		<i>the underworld. Hades: lit. the unseen</i>
Hebe	Juventas		Renpet				<i>youth</i>
Hecate	Trivia		Heqet			Matronae	<i>will; Hecate: trans. she who has power far off</i> ^[24]
Helios	Sol Invictus / Sol Indiges	Usil	Ra ^[25]	Shamash (Utu)	Mithra		<i>sun</i>
Hephaestus	Vulcan	Sethlans	Ptah	Kothar-wa-Khasis ^[26]	Atar	Gobannos	<i>metalwork, forges; fire, lava</i>
Hera	Juno	Uni	Mut / Hathor		Armaiti		<i>marriage, family</i>
Heracles	Hercules	Hercle	Heryshaf, Shu ^[27]	Melqart	Rostam	Ogmios	<i>Heracles: lit. glory/fame of Hera</i>
Hermes	Mercury	Turms	Anubis, Thoth	Taautus	Shamash	Lugus / Viducus	<i>transitions; boundaries; thieves; travelers; commerce; Hermes: poss. "interpreter"; Mercurius: related to Latin "merx" (merchandise), "mercari" (to trade), and "merces" (wages)</i>
Hesperus	Vesper			Shalim			<i>evening, supper, evening star, west</i> ^[28]

Greek	Roman	Etruscan	Egyptian	Phoenician	Zororastrian	Celtic	Functions
Hestia	Vesta		Anuket				hearth, fireplace, domesticity
Hygeia	Salus					Sirona	health; cleanliness
Ilithyia	Lucina	Ilithiia	Tawaret				childbirth, midwifery
Irene	Pax						peace
Iris	Arcus / Iris		Nut				rainbow
	Janus	Culsans					beginnings; transitions; motion; doorways
Lachesis	Decima						Lachesis: lit. disposer of lots; luck
Leto	Latona	Letun					Demureness; mothers
Maia						Rosmerta	growth
Moirai (Moerae)	Fates or Parcae						Apportioners
Muses	Camenae						Music; inspiration
Nemesis or Rhamnusia	Invidia						"retribution"
Nike	Victoria	Meanpe				Bodua / Brigantia / Nemetona	victory
Notus	Auster						South Wind
Odysseus	Ulysses or Ulixes	Uthste					hero
Palaemon	Portunus						keys, doors; ports, harbors
Pan	Faunus		Min, Khem ^[29]				nature, the wild
Persephone	Proserpina	Persipnei					poss. "to emerge"
Phaon		Phaun / Faun / Phamu					mortal boatman given youth and

Greek	Roman	Etruscan	Egyptian	Phoenician	Zororastrian	Celtic	Functions
							<i>beauty by Aphrodite</i>
PHEME	Fama						<i>fame; rumor</i>
Phosphoros	Lucifer			Attar			<i>lit. light bearer</i>
Poseidon	Neptune	Nethuns		Yam	Apam Napat		<i>sea; water; horses; earthquakes</i>
Priapus	Mutunus Tutunus						<i>fertility; livestock; gardens; male genitalia</i>
Prometheus		Prumathe					<i>forethought</i>
Rhea	Ops / Magna Mater (see Cybele above)		Nut	Asherah			<i>Rhea: lit. flowing. Ops: lit. wealth, abundance, resources.</i>
Selene	Luna	Losna Tiur	Isis, Thoth, Khonsu	Yarikh	Mah		<i>moon</i>
Silenos	Silvanus	Selvans				Sucellus	<i>Silvanus: lit. of the woods</i>
Thallo		Thalna					<i>blossoms</i>
Thanatos	Mors	Leinth Charun	Anubis	Mot			<i>death</i>
Themis	Justitia		Ma'at				<i>law of nature</i>
Tyche	Fortuna	Nortia		Gad			<i>luck, fortune</i>
Typhon			Set / Apep				<i>"whirlwinds, storms, chaos, darkness"</i>
Uranus	Caelus		Nut	El	Asman		<i>sky, heavens</i>
	Vertumnus	Voltumna		Baal			<i>the seasons; change</i>
Zephyr	Favonius						<i>West Wind; Favonius: lit. favorable</i>
Zeus	Jupiter or Jove ^[30]	Tinia	Amun ^[31]	Hadad	Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd)	Taranis	<i>weather, storms, lightning, Sky Father</i>

In art

Examples of deities depicted in syncretic compositions by means of *interpretatio graeca* or *romana*:



Jupiter Ammon
(terracotta of
Hellenistic style, 1st
century AD)



Syncretized figure
from the Eastern
provinces, perhaps a
[Genius](#) (1st century
BC – 1st century AD)



Isis holding [sistrum](#)
and [oinochoe](#) (Roman
marble, reign of
[Hadrian](#))



Isis, [Serapis](#), the child
[Harpocrates](#) and
Dionysos (relief from
[Roman Africa](#), late
2nd century AD)



Worshipper before
Zeus-Serapis-
[Ohrmazd](#) (Bactria, 3rd
century AD)

See also

- [Aion \(deity\)](#)
- [Mystery religions](#)
- [Honji suijaku](#), in Japan
- [Interpretatio germanica](#)
- [Interpretatio Christiana](#)
- [Celtic deities](#)

- [Proto-Indo-European religion](#), a reconstructed religion that relates Greek deities to other Indo-European deities
- [Shinbutsu-shūgō](#), a Japanese amalgamation of Buddhist and Shinto deities
- [Syncretism](#)
- [Three teachings](#), Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism as harmonious aggregate in Chinese philosophy.
- [Unknown god](#)

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